



## 101: Breathe Me In by cali-chan

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*"So breathe me in so deep. Breathe me in, I'm yours to keep..." The two of them dancing through life together, as they had been since the beginning.*

The schmoop is through the roof in this one. You have been warned.

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**I. Friday, December 14th, 1984** - *Since you've gone, I've been lost without a trace...*

Mike's hands trembled against the fabric of her dress at waist level. He was hoping she wouldn't notice, but he couldn't help it; he was just so nervous. Nervous and excited and surprised, and so, so happy.

He'd never danced with a girl before. Well, with his mother at family reunions when he was younger, and he was sure he'd danced with Holly once or twice to get her to giggle. But this was different. This was El. This meant everything.

She had been his first real crush. She'd been his first real kiss. For almost a full year he'd thought she was gone, that he would never see her again—that there would never be any more firsts between them, and it hurt worse than anything Mike had ever felt before. For months he had been a shell of himself, like all the fun and all the wonder had been sucked out of the world when she disappeared. He'd never known someone could feel like that; that someone you've only known for a few days could leave such a big hole in your soul. But El had, somehow—with few words she'd entrenched herself in his heart and changed his life completely. How does one get over that?

But he didn't have to, because now here she was, in his arms as they moved to The Police, looking more beautiful than he had ever seen her. Her arms around his neck were giving him goosebumps, and

every time she looked up at him between her lashes, with that shy smile that made his heart go pitter-patter, he wanted to pinch himself to make sure this wasn't a dream.

She was his first real dance. And sure, he still should pay attention not to do something stupid like step on her foot or something, but he couldn't tear his gaze away from her face for a second. Not too long ago, he thought he'd never have this. Now, it felt like just one of many, many upcoming firsts. And he couldn't wait.

"I'm happy you're here," he told her, barely able to hear his own words over the rhythm of the music and the beat of his own heart. He didn't know if he meant here *here*— in the gym of Hawkins Middle, at the Snow Ball, in his arms— or whether he meant here in general. Probably both. She'd been gone for so long, he thought he'd lost her forever, and now that she was back, that he could see her, even in a limited capacity, he just wanted to drink in every little bit of her presence that he could get, knowing now how precious it was.

"Me too," she replied, moving just the slightest bit closer to him in a way that made his breath catch. She was so pretty, it scrambled his senses a little. Her cheeks were flushed and her dark eyes reflected the bright lights around the gym as her gaze met his. Her lips pressed together as she gave him a brilliant smile, her lip gloss pink and shiny, and he really, really wanted to kiss her.

He saw her gaze shift momentarily to his own lips and he wondered if maybe she wanted to kiss him, too. Maybe she was waiting for him to make the first move. The butterflies in his stomach fluttered madly, and for a moment he forgot where he was, that there were people around them— teachers who would disapprove, classmates who would notice, friends who would tease them mercilessly. All he could see was her: beautiful and real and *here*, and he didn't want to miss a chance to be close to her. He didn't want to miss a moment.

So he leaned in, and his heart did a dance of its own when she lifted herself up on her tiptoes to meet him in the middle, pressing her mouth against his with a firmness that sent a bolt of electricity down his spine. Her lips were soft and pliable as they'd been every time they'd kissed in the past, but there was an energy, a confidence to the way she pressed them against his that hadn't been there before, and

he wondered if this is what kissing her would feel like from now on, now that they were mostly free to do this without worrying that it all would go away.

He loved kissing her. He could kiss her over and over and never get tired of it.

They separated after a second— as much as they enjoyed it, it was still new— and her eyes remained closed for a heartbeat longer before she looked up at him with a giddy smile. He couldn't help the goofy grin on his own face as she moved closer, and he bowed his head until it was resting against hers, the crooning tones of Sting in the background as they swayed in place to the rhythm.

As the song started drawing to a close El pushed herself closer, wrapping her arms fully around his neck and resting her head against the crook where his neck met his shoulder, where it fit so perfectly that Mike didn't even have the words to describe it. He wrapped his own arms around her waist, drawing her tightly against him with a sigh.

They weren't even dancing anymore; they were just hugging. His fellow classmates around them were breaking apart to switch partners or go get some punch, and in the back of his mind Mike was wary a chaperone would come by soon to tell them they had to remain at least a foot apart at all times, but frankly, at the moment he didn't care. All he cared about at that moment was holding her. He wanted to have her in his arms forever, never let go.

So as the music faded into a different song and the pre-teens around them rearranged to jive to a faster beat, Mike and El relished in the warmth of their embrace. Because she was back in his life for good now, they had time, but every moment between them still felt special, hard-fought, and Mike hoped that feeling stayed with him for the rest of his life.

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## II. Sunday, February 19th, 1989 - ...*Lost in love is what I feel when I'm with you.*

As Mike got out of the car, he saw that El was already making her way toward him. That was good; he'd been dreading having to knock on the front door so early in the morning, so he was glad she'd chosen to wait by the window and had seen him arrive.

"Hey," he greeted her with a bright grin. "Happy birthday!" He opened his arms so she could barrel into him in a hug. It was a little squishy with all the layers they were wearing, but he wasn't complaining— she looked as cute as a button with her curls bouncing off the plaid scarf around her neck and a light blue beanie pulled almost all the way down to her eyelids.

"You already wished me a happy birthday at midnight," she huffed against the fabric of his coat once she finally managed to wade through the snow quickly enough to be able to wrap her arms around him.

"Yeah, well, it bears repeating," he assured her, leaning forward to peck her lips sweetly. He'd stayed up late at the Hopper house last night so he could congratulate her at midnight before heading back to his house to catch a few hours of sleep before their road trip today. But he didn't mind saying it over and over again through the course of the day— it wasn't every day his girl turned eighteen, after all. "Ready to go?"

"Yup." She stole a kiss of her own before signaling to the bag she was carrying. "Just let me throw this in the trunk and we can set sail." She had packed a few extra blankets for them— mainly because the station wagon's heating had been fritzing out on Mike every once in a while, but also because she knew they'd have to be standing outside the bookstore for at least a couple of hours in order to get good spots, so she wanted to be prepared for the cold.

Just as she left his arms to do just that, though, she stopped abruptly in her steps. "Ooh, I love this song!" she exclaimed, guessing what it was from just the first couple of chords, and moved past Mike to lean into the car through the driver-side window and turn the volume up. Not so loud that it would wake up her entire family, but just enough

that they could hear the song clearly from outside the car.

She left her bag momentarily on top of the hood and turned to him with a coy smile. "Dance with me?" she asked, extending a gloved hand toward him.

The question was so unexpected that his eyebrows lifted all the way under his fringe. "Really?" he asked with a chuckle. "It's six in the morning and it's snowing." It wasn't that he didn't want to; sure, he wasn't the greatest dancer so he tended not to do it often, but El loved it and didn't begrudge his awkward attempts at keeping to a rhythm, so he didn't mind indulging her requests every once in a while. She'd never asked him to dance in these conditions before, though— and definitely never in full view of her front door.

"Yes, but it's my birthday, so you have to do what I want," she countered quite effectively, and Mike found himself relenting with an amused shake of his head. He took hold of her hand and pulled her close— as close as all the layers they were wearing allowed— her arms around his neck as they started swaying to the music, the sounds of the forest around them mingling with the tinny audio coming from his radio and the sweet sound of her voice as she hummed along with the melody under her breath.

So there they were, two teenagers in love, in her driveway by his parked car, dancing to a mushy power ballad in the twilight before dawn on a snowy February morning. And it was perfect.

"Thank you," she whispered in his ear, and it made him shiver in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. "For doing this for me," she added, rubbing the tip of her nose against the side of his face affectionately. He wasn't sure if she meant just the dancing or rather their plans for the day, but either way the reasoning behind it was the same.

"Anything to make you happy," he whispered in response, pressing a kiss to the side of her head. She pulled back just enough that she could look at him, and he smiled softly. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she replied softly and leaned forward to kiss him again. Slower this time. Deeper. Putting all of their love for one

another in a caress of lips and tongues, hearts and souls. He loved her so much he wished he could breathe her in, keep her inside of him always, closer than two human beings could realistically get. Intellectually he knew that was impossible, but the desire was bigger than himself, a feeling so all-encompassing that it felt like something that was about to burst out of his chest, something that could only be measured in touches, and kisses, and sighs.

"We should get going," he reminded her, out of breath, as they separated. The song was still playing and they were still swaying from side to side, although they were slightly off-beat by this point. "We have to leave soon if we want to get there early."

"Okay," she agreed, equally out of breath, but letting go of him to go grab her bag and throw it in the back seat as she'd originally intended.

Mike watched her do so for a moment. When he went to get into the car he happened to lift his gaze toward her house again and caught sight of the chief standing at the front door. He was in what looked like sleepwear and a robe, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed as he stared intensely in their direction.

Immediately Mike started. Had he seen them dancing? Had he seen them kissing? Not that it would be the first time or anything, but he hadn't been expecting anyone to be watching them at that hour of the morning. He thought the moment was just theirs. Now he felt all weird about it, but he guessed there wasn't much he could do to help that, so he raised a hand and waved awkwardly at the chief. Hopper did not return the gesture, but Mike thought he saw him nod.

"Mike?" He was snapped out of it by El's voice— she'd taken her seat on the passenger side, and was leaning over the center console to look at him through the open window, a little concerned. "Is everything okay?"

"Uh, yeah," he assured her, shaking Hopper's gaze from his mind as he opened his door and got into the car, figuring they had no time to waste. "Let's go," he declared once he was safely buckled up, setting the car out of park so he could steer it away from the driveway. It was a long road out to the city, but he was with El, so he didn't mind



one bit.

El's song came up on the radio once again that afternoon while they were driving home. She pushed her seat back and propped her legs up on the dashboard as she sang along, gleefully stretching out the second syllable in "babyyyyyy" while beaming at him. He watched her out of the corner of his eye with an amused smile and was once again completely overwhelmed by the realization of how much he adored her. How was it possible to love one person this much? He didn't know, couldn't possibly comprehend it, but he knew that's how he felt, and that was never going to change.

When she paused for a second to take a breath he took her hand, entwining his fingers with hers atop the gear selector. She smiled at him, her eyes shining with love, and he couldn't help but wonder if this is what bliss felt like.

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**III. Saturday, November 9th, 1996** - *Take back your life and let me inside...*

"Hey... dance with me," Mike asked his bride as he tugged her to him by the hand. He'd only barely managed to catch her as she walked past him toward the refreshments table. He hadn't seen her in a while, which frankly he thought was a little ridiculous. This was their wedding, after all; weren't they supposed to be holding hands and whispering sweet nothings in each other's ear for the entirety of the evening?

Instead, El had spent the last half hour dancing with all their friends and relatives— Mike never thought there'd be a downside to his friends loving her so much, and he was aware he was being needy, but he missed her already. That was his prerogative today, wasn't it?

"Can it be a little later?" was her answer, however, and he couldn't help but pout. "I'm sorry, it's just— Dustin kept spinning me around

the dance floor like a crazy person and I really need to catch my breath. I'm going to get something to drink, do you want anything?"

"Noooo, come on. I even requested a special song and everything," Mike insisted, pulling her closer and giving her puppy eyes. She rolled her eyes at him, amused. "It'll be a slow dance, I promise. It won't tire you out."

She didn't give in, exactly; not verbally, at least. But she did let herself be pulled closer, a hand in his and the other one around his neck as she looked up at him with an amused smile. Mike pulled her closer by the waist, breathing in the smell of her: the familiar vanilla of her shampoo, the gardenias of her bouquet, and of course a hint of hairspray.

She expressed surprise that he didn't lead her back to the dance floor, but that was never in his plans. They'd already had their customary first dance— some schmalzy Celine Dion song that made his mother bawl like a baby— and then not much else because Mike had two left feet and El had been swept away by her father, *his* father, her brothers, all their male friends, and heck, even Max, who didn't mind taking the position of the male and could not resist some good ol' Gloria Gaynor.

But Mike did enjoy dancing with El every once in a while; he loved holding her in his arms as they swayed to the music. He loved the feel of her resting against him as they moved softly from side to side like floating on air, the sensation that the world around them disappeared and it was just the two of them having a moment of their own. So when he asked her to dance, he didn't want to go where everybody else was; instead, they remained close to their table, partially hidden behind the decorations, where they would hopefully not be disturbed.

El's smile turned into a smirk when the first chords of the song he'd requested finally started playing. "You can't slow dance to this song," she pointed out, clearly recognizing it from when he'd played it in her presence in the months since the album came out.

"I can and I will," he reiterated confidently as they started moving to the beat; the song started slow enough that he was easily capable of

keeping up and just sticking to that same rhythm even when the pace picked up. "Have I ever told you how proud I am of you?" he asked, and in any other circumstance it would've seemed like a non-sequitur, but he was sure El understood why he brought it up now.

The alt-rock tune was more his speed than hers, but she'd loved it since he first played it for her because of what it meant to him. It wasn't technically a love song, but Mike felt it represented *them*. The song reminded him of all the things they'd gone through since they were children— a period of life that was meant to be the height of innocence and fun, and yet they'd had to face some of the darkest situations anyone could ever have to deal with.

The darkness could've torn them apart, both literally and figuratively, a thousand and one times through the years, but it hadn't. They'd survived; El, especially, as she'd been so mistreated even back in her childhood, but she'd made it through every evil and come out stronger on the other side. And now here they were, still together against all odds— *married* now, he'd never get tired of thinking that— and this day felt like a celebration of every struggle they'd triumphed over, every fear, every doubt, every shadow they'd vanquished together.

"You may have mentioned it once or twice," was her response, in a purposefully evasive tone that let him know she was teasing him. But then she gave him a genuine smile, pulling his face down so she could kiss him, resting her forehead against his as she pulled back. "I'm proud of *us*," she whispered, closing her eyes as if to savor the moment.

"I'm proud of us, too," he agreed, leaning forward to press a delicate kiss on each of her lowered eyelids. She sighed, relaxing against his shoulder. "Was today everything you wanted it to be?"

"*This* is everything I want," she replied, her hand tightening on his back as she gripped the fabric of his suit jacket. She lifted her head so she could look directly at him again. "When I was growing up... I never dreamed that I could ever have a life like this." Her honey-colored eyes bored into his. "Thank you, Mike."

He understood the feeling, more than she would ever know.

Sometimes he wondered what his life would be like if he hadn't found her that night in the rain, and even his very active imagination couldn't conjure up a scenario that wasn't dull and lonely. They'd been through a lot of pain and horrors in life, lost people they cared about and sacrificed parts of themselves that they would never get back, but they had made it this far together, and that meant everything to him. "I wouldn't change a thing," he whispered down at her. She only held him tighter.

As the song started to wind down, he offered to go get her that drink she'd initially wanted so she could sit down at their table and rest her feet. She agreed enthusiastically, thanking him effusively and tacking on a winking promise to love him forever for good measure, which had him laughing all the way to the bar.

He came back with her drink a few minutes later to find that she had been swept away to the dance floor again, where she was currently singing along to Jim Croce while doing "The Hopper" with her dad. Mike didn't even mind; he loved seeing her laugh like that, so carefree and happy. Heck, he wouldn't mind joining in himself.

After all, they had the rest of their lives to slow dance together. Today was just day one.

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**IV. Thursday, September 24th, 1998 - *You're my survival, you're my living proof...***

Mike was startled away from his writing when the first couple of whines came in through the baby monitor. Taking off his glasses, he rubbed his eyes and stretched his back a little before pushing his chair away from the desk and standing up to go tend to his daughter.

"Hey there, baby girl," he said as he entered their office-turned-nursery for the third time in the last two hours. Normally Annie wasn't this fussy; well, not at this hour, at least. It wasn't uncommon

for her to wake up at least once in the middle of the night, but it was usually later— conveniently when Mike and El were already sound asleep themselves.

Tonight, though, she seemed to be having problems staying asleep for some reason. Mike wasn't sure what it was. He'd already given her her bottle earlier, and he'd already changed her diaper, too. She didn't have a fever and she didn't seem to be in pain; she did manage to eventually fall asleep once he calmed her down, but she couldn't seem to stay down for more than an hour straight.

The whines turned into full-out sobbing the moment he leaned over the edge of the crib to look at her. "Aw, don't cry, princess," he lamented as he picked her up, pressing kisses on her chubby cheeks before he rested her against his shoulder. "You probably just miss your Mama, don't you?" he added as he swung slowly from side to side, trying to calm her down with the soothing motion.

Normally both he and El were home to put her to bed at night. El had only recently gone back to work after her maternity leave, so things were still a little bit hectic on the schedule front, but they always tried to have Annie asleep early on so they could finish whatever work needed to be finished before going to bed themselves.

Tonight, however, El had gotten called into work for an emergency around the time they were finishing up dinner, so Mike was on his own with the baby for the time being. It was now past ten thirty and he had a feeling Annie had noticed her mother's absence. "Don't worry, she'll be back soon. I promise," he said, dropping one more kiss against the shock of dark, curly hair that already covered her head. So much like El's. Everybody in their family seemed to have an opinion on who Annie looked the most like. Mike couldn't really tell, himself— it was hard to tell with babies! He was just glad she hadn't gotten his nose— but the hair was all El's. It never failed to make him smile.

"Meanwhile," he added as he rearranged her weight in his arms, pacing around the room, "you and I are going to have some fun, aren't we?" Her cries were just beginning to cease from his movements. "You want to dance with Daddy? Of course you do, you love dancing with Daddy."

He carried her over to the back of the room, where a small, old radio sat on a side table surrounded by a bunch of Annie's toys. Music was usually the fastest way to get Annie to doze off. She loved music; no matter what kind of music it was, it made her smile and laugh when she was cranky, and lulled her to sleep when she was tired. Mike swore up and down that Annie would be a musician or a dancer when she grew up. El usually just shook her head in amusement and pointedly reminded him that she was not yet a year old and a lot could change in the next twenty or so years.

El had a whole collection of educational music she liked to use for the purpose of getting her to sleep, but Mike usually went straight for the radio, tuning in to his favorite local pop/rock station and letting the music play as he swayed the little girl in his arms. It usually only took a few minutes after that for her whines to turn into happy gurgles, and tonight was no exception.

"That's my girl," Mike said proudly, jolting her a little in his arms, which she responded to with a joyful squeal. "You like that song? It's a good song, isn't it?" he referenced the song that had just come up on the radio—a rock ballad he recognized because it was everywhere these days. It was starting to get a little overplayed in his opinion, but he actually quite liked it.

"Now let's go to sleep," he whispered, pushing his daughter's head down to rest against his shoulder, her thumb going immediately straight to her mouth. He rubbed her back softly and hummed the melody under his breath as he shifted his weight from foot to foot along with the music.

It only took a little while for her breaths to start evening out, but Mike kept dancing, aware that if he stopped too suddenly, she might just wake up again. As the song started hitting its climax he heard the sound of the front door open and close carefully. "Is she asleep?" he heard his wife whisper from behind him about a minute later.

"Almost there," he whispered back over his daughter's head, just catching El's silhouette standing under the doorframe to the nursery out of the corner of his eye. "Everything went fine?" he asked, referring to the case she'd been called in for.

"It'll keep till morning," she replied, and he nodded, knowing that she couldn't give him many details. He saw her take off her purse and ID card and drop them along with her keys on the side table beside the crib— the one that wasn't covered in baby toys— before moving closer to him and the baby. "I like this song," she said, carefully wrapping her arms around his waist from behind. She rested her head between his shoulder blades, making sure not to disturb Annie in any way, and started swaying along to the beat with the two of them.

"Mm-hmm," he murmured in response, enjoying the feeling of her form pressed against his back. They'd been so busy with work and the baby, and even the last few months of El's pregnancy, that they hadn't had much time to themselves in a long time. "You want me to reheat your dinner?" he asked. He'd put her food in the fridge earlier since she'd had to leave halfway through eating.

"Mmm, I just want to go to bed," she declared with a sigh, her breath tickling the back of his neck. "Come with me?"

"Just let me put this one down and turn off my computer, and I'll be right there," Mike retorted quickly, eager to hopefully get to spend at least a couple of hours of quality time with his wife before it was absolutely imperative for them to go to sleep.

"Okay," she said, pulling back just enough that she could press a suggestive kiss to the back of his neck. "I'll be waiting for you."

She let go of him, her arms tantalizingly sliding against the sides of his torso as she did so, and walked out of the nursery. He watched her go with an interested smile before turning toward the crib. "All right, here we go," he said as he pulled Annie away from his shoulder, carefully laying her back down. She didn't stir. He moved her fuzzy bunny plushie her Grandpa Hopper had given her within her reach.

He leaned down to kiss the crown of her head. "Sleep well, princess," he whispered to her, hoping at least this once she'd sleep through the night given that she'd already woken up three times. He turned to the side table to turn the radio off and walked out of the room, hitting the light switch as he crossed the doorway.

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**V. Tuesday, May 20th, 2008** - *Because tonight will be the night that I will fall for you over again...*

As Mike closed the front door behind him, he noticed that the television in the living room seemed to be on, probably on some sort of 24-hour music channel if the electronic beat coming out of the speakers was any indication. As he peeked in, he saw the back of El's head lift off the couch, almost like she'd dozed off without meaning to and had only been awakened by the sound of her husband coming home.

When she turned to look at him, however, he could see from her expression that she was wide awake. "Where have you been?" she demanded as she stood up from the sofa, frowning at him. "I called your mother at the hotel and she said you had left two hours ago."

"I went for a drive," Mike retorted in a quiet tone as he dropped his keys on the coffee table and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt. "Lost track of time."

"You left me on my own to tell the kids," she threw back accusingly, crossing her arms around her torso as he approached her. She was angry; he could tell. "Jimmy's too young to really understand, but Annie isn't, and I had no idea what to say to her."

"I'll talk to her in the morning," Mike assured her, and he meant it. The kids hadn't been particularly close to his father, but they'd spent a lot more time with him now that he'd been in town for treatment, even if Mike and El had tried their hardest to shield them as much as possible from the realities of his illness. He wanted to make sure they understood what was happening and how it affected them. "I just needed some time to think, okay?"

El's arms tightened around herself. "You can take some time for yourself if you want it, Mike. You don't need my permission; I'm not



your warden." She sighed as she shook her head. "I just wish you had let me know. I was worried." He could see that she was, too. Though the anger was easier to spot, flashing in her brown irises every time she looked at him, he could see in the way she held herself that she'd been scared, too, and it tugged at his heart.

"I know. I'm sorry," he added, meaning the words as they came out of his mouth. He really *had* lost track of time, but he should've let her know where he was going as soon as he dropped his mother and sisters off at the Residence Inn. He just hadn't been... he didn't really know what he'd been thinking.

It was his turn to sigh. "Look, can we not... can we not fight about this? At least for today?" he asked, taking a step closer as the song that was playing on the TV in the background switched to a slower piece.

All the fight seemed to leave her the moment their gazes met. Perhaps she realized there was no point in arguing, or she could simply see how exhausted he was, both mentally and physically. "Of course," she said, her tone softer, more understanding. Her arms dropped, and she took a step forward for the first time, her hand stretched out to touch his arm. "Are you okay?"

They'd always had their arguments through the years, but things at home had been abnormally strained over the past few months, with Mike taking on the leadership of a particularly difficult project at work and El in the process of opening her private practice, plus the fact that the kids were both in school now. Add to that his father's illness and his parents having to spend the past few weeks in the city in order to deal with it, and the tension was more than palpable lately. But tonight wasn't the night for that.

"I'm... fine," he replied, sounding a little unsure even to his ears. He felt... hollow, in a way. Not really sad, not in pain, but just... muted somehow. He hadn't thought his father's passing would hit him that hard—he had known it was coming for a while—but it was different now that it had actually happened. "Just... thinking too much, I guess."

"What still needs to be done?" she asked, looking down at her hand

on his arm as if unsure. "I can help with some of the arrangements if you need me to. I know Nancy and Holly are there with your mom, but they shouldn't have to deal with all of that on top of getting everything ready back in Hawkins..."

"Yeah, they'll, uh, they'll appreciate that," he nodded at the idea, thankful that she had thought of all the stuff that needed to be done because he hadn't thought about any of it yet himself. Of everything he'd thought about on his night drive tonight, paperwork was the last thing on his mind. "El, um... can I ask you something?"

"Sure, anything," she retorted without hesitation, open to anything he needed at the moment. She was giving that way, always thinking of others before herself, and it was one of the reasons why he fell in love with her in the first place.

And he needed her to know that today more than ever. Moving a hand to her waist, he pulled her closer, resting his forehead against the side of her head. "You... you know I love you, right?" he asked in a low tone, heart in his throat. He didn't know why he was so nervous, but suddenly it felt like his entire life was hanging on her answer to that question.

She seemed to find it sudden, too, pulling her head slightly back so she could look him in the eye. "Why wouldn't I?" she asked, confused. She narrowed her eyes at him for a second. "Where is this coming from, Mike? I know we've been arguing more than usual lately, but —"

"No, no, it's not about that," he was quick to say, but then thought about it better. Looking back on it, he couldn't be sure that it wasn't *that* which had led to his contemplative mood today. "Or maybe it is, a little," he admitted, and her eyebrows drew together warily.

Before she could grow anymore alarmed, he explained. "I was just thinking... if there's anything I learned from my father— in some obtuse, reverse-psychology kind of way— it's that I should always make sure that the people I love know that I love them."

She was quick to reassure him that his father *had* loved him— which he knew, yes, intellectually. Fathers loved their children, ergo. But

now that his father was gone and he was thinking of everything they lived together, he couldn't help but remember all the times he wished his father had been more involved, and looking back on the past few months it terrified him that he might be going down the same route.

"I know he did," he stated, not entirely sure if he was saying it out loud for her benefit or his. "I just... I just need you to know. You and the kids, you're the most important thing in my life, and I need you guys to *always* know that."

"They know, Mike," she assured him earnestly, lifting both her hands to cup his face so she could draw his gaze straight toward her. "I know. You show us every day."

"Do I?" he asked, and if there was a subtext of bitterness in his tone, she chose to ignore it.

"Yes. You do." Her voice didn't tremble, her gaze didn't falter. She meant every word she was saying, and he loved her all the more for it. "Life gets complicated, and things can't be perfect all the time, but our kids will *never* doubt that you love them. Okay? They know. We know. And that's never going to change."

He felt a tension he didn't know he'd been carrying leave his body at her words, and he reached out for her waist with both hands, drawing her close. Her arms wrapped tightly around his neck as he exhaled into her shoulder. "I love you so much," he reiterated, burying his nose in the delicate curve of her neck and breathing her in. Just having her in his arms made him feel centered again, like the world was back in position after having tumbled off its axis.

"I love you, too, babe," she replied, pressing a kiss to his temple as she started rocking him from side to side in an attempt to soothe his distress. "I'm here. I'm always gonna be here for you."

He clung to her with more insistence than he would later admit to himself, grasping for her stability in a moment when he felt unstable within his own skin. Before he knew it they were swaying along to the music, the melodic tones of the acoustic guitar mollifying his anxiety as he let himself think of nothing but the feeling of her presence, her warmth against his body, and the magnitude of his love

for her that even after nearly twenty-five years still caught him by surprise.

There'd be time to think about arrangements the next morning— what needed to be done here, how they would deal with the medical bills, how soon would they all have to travel back to Indiana, would they take the kids with them or not— but tonight was not the night for that.

For now, all he wanted was El, here in his arms, the two of them dancing through life together, as they had been since the beginning.

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**Notes:** So that last one got a wee bit angsty, lol. Oops? I blame John Vesely. Also, if you've been following the Quiet Moments series for a while you might recognize certain characters and situations— be sure to mention it in a comment if you did! People noticing my silly self-references never fails to make me smile.

The songs:

- I. "Every Breath You Take" by The Police (released May 20th, 1983)
- II. "When I'm With You" by Sheriff (originally released November 27th, 1982 and rereleased in February 1989)
- III. "Desperately Wanting" by Better Than Ezra (released August 13th, 1996) (You can totally slow dance to this, people)
- IV. "I'll Be" by Edwin McCain (released June 24th, 1997)
- V. "Fall For You" by Secondhand Serenade (released January 21st, 2008). The title of this fic and the lyrics in the summary are also from this song.

**\*\*\* ATTENTION ALL MILEVEN FANFIC WRITERS, FANARTISTS, PHOTOSHOP EDITORS, VIDEO MAKERS, ET AL \*\*\***

fatechica, everybreatheverymove, and myself have been working on a project you might be interested in: **Mileven Week**, a celebration of all things Mike/Eleven that will be taking place from November 6th

to the 12th every year starting this year. How does it work? We post a list of prompts/themes, people write (or create art, or make a photoshop edit, or make a video) based on those themes, post it on Tumblr and then we reblog it so that more people get the chance to see it. (You can also crosspost it here, that's totally allowed!)

Interested? Head on over to mileven-week on Tumblr to learn more. **We're accepting theme suggestions now!** Yes, *you* can tell us what you want to see in your Mileven fanworks! Come join us and take part in this, it's going to be awesome— the world needs more Mileven, we all know this.